

# Language learning in virtual worlds: Designing for languaging, the role of affordances

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**Abstract.** This article will utilise data collected during SLItaliano, an Italian language course run in the Virtual World (VW) of Second Life® (SL®) in 2012. The course was offered to third level students of Italian as a Foreign Language (FL) in an Irish college, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). It was designed and coordinated by the researcher and is at the core of a research on FL teaching in VWs. The focus of the paper is on identifying affordances for language learning in VWs, particularly languaging as a communicative practice (Swain, 2006). The concept of affordance is approached from an Activity Theory (AT) standpoint (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012) as an “action possibility” present in the environment, which may or may not emerge. In the case of VWs as learning environments, such possibilities are not only provided by the characteristics of the hardware and of the software, but they are also shaped by the users and their history and by the context they find themselves in and may be “sequential and nested in time” (Hammond, 2010, p. 216). The possibility to engage in languaging was one of the affordances that emerged during SLItaliano. Languaging is defined as that practice when language is used in order to work at solving a problem or clarifying an issue (Swain & Lapkin, 2011). The data showed how certain tasks had a higher occurrence of *languaging episodes* and how particular situations prompted the recourse to languaging. The data will also show that when affordances which were expected to emerge failed to be noticed by the participants, the results were sometimes surprising and provided further insight into the potential of VWs for FL teaching.

**Keywords:** virtual worlds, language learning, affordances, languaging.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2010, Hew and Cheung highlighted that the number of studies concerning FL learning in VWs was still low and stressed the need for more investigation into the affordances of these environments for language learning. The study mentioned in this article aims at delivering a contribution in this field through a detailed analysis of data collected during a course of Italian in SL® and an identification of emerging affordances during the language tasks.

VWs are seen here as heterotopias of our time, spaces comprising different (and sometimes incompatible) places at the same time, environments that are part of our physical space but can only be accessed via actual ‘gateways’ (Foucault, 1967). These spaces interact with our physical space, and such interaction affects their users, who act spatially (and chronologically) in the virtual and, at the same time, in the physical world they inhabit. Presence, time/space dimensions and affordances are three main concepts that can help us understand how VWs can best be used for learning (Blin, Fowley, & Nocchi, 2013), and this paper will discuss how certain VW characteristics and task design conditions resulted in the emergence of languaging, an affordance for language learning.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

The study adopts an AT approach for data analysis. AT sees a collective activity as a complex historically evolving process, carried out through goal-directed actions that are composed of a number of automatic operations (Engeström, 1987). During the course of an activity, however, when changed conditions occur, there can be breakdowns or disturbances that bring about a shift in the focus of that activity, which may turn to what used to be automatic operations, in order to solve the occurring issue.

When looking at what happens in a computer-mediated environment, breakdowns and focus shifts can be good pointers for understanding how an application mediates (or does not mediate) an activity. Also, they may be evidence of important moments in the development of that activity.

### 1.2. Affordances as possibilities for action

In the last decade, affordances have been adopted as a useful concept for the analysis of educational tasks (Blin et al., 2013; Dalgarno & Lee, 2010; Hammond, 2010; Hollins & Robbins, 2008). Affordances can indeed assist in clarifying aspects of the

intricacies of teaching and learning in computer mediated learning environments and are a suitable tool for finding how best to incorporate media attributes into the design of learning tasks. Additionally, in the field of new media psychology (Riva, 2007), affordances have been recognised as one of the four conceptual tools that allow a psychological analysis of new media.

The definition of affordance, however, is still causing some debate. In this study, the concept of affordance is approached from an AT standpoint; its definition is re-grounded in a Vygotskian sociocultural approach, where technology is seen as a culturally developed tool mediating a human being's activity. Affordances are action possibilities (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012) offered by an environment where different elements relate to each other in different ways depending on the user, the time and the way they are used.

### **1.3. Languaging**

The idea of languaging was first introduced by Swain in 2006 and sees language as a process, a tool used to mediate thinking. Languaging is a verbalisation used to mediate a cognitively demanding activity, it is a “talking-it-through” (Swain, 2006, p. 99) which people use to communicate with each other (or in a dialogue with the self) in order to solve problems or clarify issues. Languaging enables people to create and negotiate meanings and intentions and to transfer them across time and space, thus becoming a major source of L2 learning (Swain, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 2011).

## **2. Method**

SLItaliano, an Italian language course, was run in Second Life© in 2011/2012. The course was intended for a group of four International Business and Languages students at DIT (Ireland) who wanted to develop their FL intercultural and language competence. SLItaliano consisted of nine in-world sessions, each with a different theme and language tasks. The course took place in the Italian island of Imparafacile, and enlisted a group of Italian volunteers, who participated in the sessions, helped with the set-up, and took part in most of the language tasks.

## **3. Data collection and analysis**

The nine sessions were recorded using a screen-capture software, Camtasia. Three sessions were then transcribed and analysed. Special attention was paid to

the activities around the tasks, the issues arising during those activities, and the affordances that emerged (or failed to).

One of the educational affordances of VWs identified by the author is the possibility to connect, interact and engage in synchronous (and asynchronous) discourse, in written and oral form. During data analysis, languaging stood out as a language learning affordance.

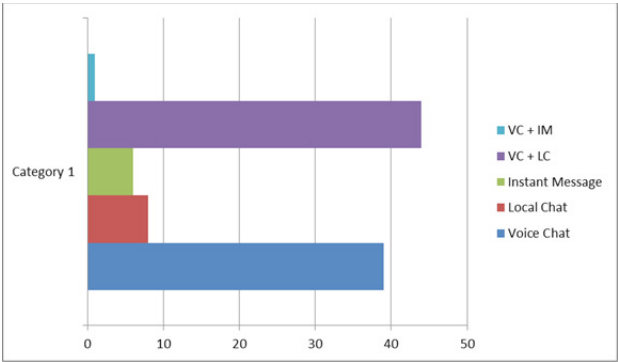
4. Results

The instances of languaging recorded in the three sessions were 98 and the students were involved in 96 of them.

4.1. Technical characteristics of VWs and languaging

Voice Chat (VC) was the preferred medium; it was used in 39 cases, compared to 8 cases of languaging in local chat (LC) and 6 using Instant Messaging (IM). Also, in 44 cases the students used both VC and LC, switching the communication between the two. In 1 instance a student used IM to add to a VC languaging episode (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Modes of languaging



4.2. Task design and languaging

A ‘trigger’ for the use of languaging had been consciously designed in some of the language tasks. Role-plays, for instance, were organised so that the players needed to talk to resolve conflicting information. Indeed, the highest occurrence of languaging was noticed during collaborative tasks and role-plays. It was noticed,

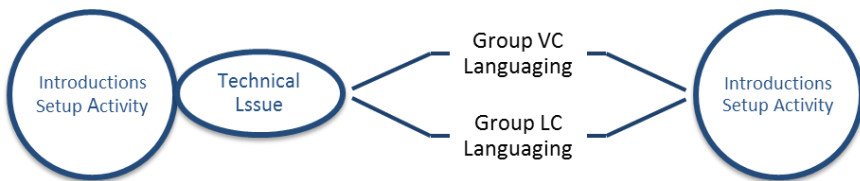
however, that languaging occurred mostly when ‘un-designed’ issues arose in the activity. Those issues were Language related (64%), Technical (25%) or Intercultural (11%).

### 4.3. Technical breakdowns and affordances

If, on the one hand, language and intercultural issues are common to language tasks, technical issues were specific to the environment mediating the activity. Sometimes, due to a technical breakdown or to the inability of the user to fully exploit the VW’s characteristics, some affordances, such as the possibility for exploration and immersion, did not emerge. In these cases languaging became a way of finding a solution.

An example was the set-up of Session 6, a moment when participants would get together, get to know each other, and talk about the session. In this case two students had problems rezzing (i.e. showing their avatar). As a result, the initial activity was abandoned and everyone turned their attention to solving the issue through FL languaging (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2. Focus shift in Session 6: solving the rezzing problem



## 5. Conclusions

After a data analysis, it is clear that the possibility for languaging is an important language learning affordance of VWs. This affordance was sequential to the VW technical and social affordances provided by this environment. However, even in cases when technical breakdowns prevented some affordances to emerge, FL languaging was used to deal with the issues, creating substantial FL language interaction.

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